

ZOOM IN AND TYPE IS MORE LEGIBLE

MASS PARTICIPATION

KATH HUDSON, JOURNALIST, SPORTS MANAGEMENT



MASS MARKETING

Running through rivers in winter, swimming in cold lakes, clifftop marathons... Surely there isn't a market for that? Oh, but there is. We look at the growth of mass participation sporting events

It's a particularly cold weekend in England and I'm watching my husband take part in the eight mile "The Scrooge" off road race at the Lost Gardens of Heligan, along with hundreds of other competitors. He was prepared for hills, mud and uneven terrain. What he wasn't expecting was to wade through icy cold, chest deep rivers. The blow is softened by the camaraderie of the competitors, encouragement from spectators and the good natured race officials - wearing Scrooge outfits of top hat and tails - giving a helping hand on the slippery river banks.

At the end, the competitors gather on straw bales in the barn to discuss the race over a party and a complimentary pint of Cornish lager. Unlike other sporting events, where the rivalry is intense, mass participation events tend to be relaxed and friendly, after all, the pressure to get placed is removed when there are hundreds or thousands of people taking part.

An increasing number of mass participation sporting events are springing up around the country. They range from one mile run runs to 100 mile ultra trails, from open water swimming in iconic locations and Sky Rides to Ride London

- an annual event which gets 70,000 people cycling for an entire weekend.

OLYMPIC LEGACY

London 2012 inspired many people to get more active. Figures suggest that it's the more easily accessible, individual sports which people are opting for, rather than team sports, which often have more regimented training and match times. Over the last 10 years there has been a 4.65 per cent increase in people running and jogging. Figures from the Active People survey show that sports participation has gone up since 2005, however it is really recreational cycling and running, especially mass running, which is pushing up the figures. In contrast, many team sports which are organised by national governing bodies are declining in popularity. According to Steve Wood, an independent coach who specialises in behavioural change, mass participation sports suit our lifestyle. "Many people don't want to participate in structured, organised club activities any more," he says. "They don't have the time. They want to be self determined. Mass participation sport is so successful because it gives people a goal to aim for - they go, do it and come away. Lots of sports are too exclusive because there's only a limited number of places on the team, whereas mass participation



Many of the mass participation events offer "mini events" to encourage families to take part

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sports are democratic, often catering to those with disabilities as well."

One of the sports to have benefited most from the London 2012 Olympics has been cycling. Immediately after the Games, 52 per cent of survey respondents indicated they were more motivated to cycle as a result of Team GB's achievements. British Cycling has doubled its membership in the past five years alone to 50,000, while weekend cycling races have increased massively since 2002 to more than 300 a year.

Another event, the Great Swim, was inspired by Team GB's Beijing Olympic success in open water swimming. Launched in 2008, it now runs annually in five UK locations: Windermere, Suffolk's Alton Water Reservoir, Salford Quays, Loch Lomond and Canary Wharf, London. The Great North Swim in Windermere, Cumbria, is the flagship event and 10,000 people take part over a number of

distances: from half mile races to 5k runs. "We've seen an increase in the number of people wanting to try new and exciting sporting activities, who may be daunted by the prospect of a run, but they know if they can manage 55 lengths of a pool they can complete a one mile swim and have a great time doing it," says Great Swim spokesperson, Philippa Morrow.

Morrow says swimming is an accessible sport and open water swimming, without lanes, walls or chlorine is a liberating experience for those who like swimming. "The sport is growing. We're really pleased we've been able to give people the opportunity to experience such an enjoyable way of staying active," she says.

BUCKET LISTS

Marathon participation is also on the increase, as more events are springing up. According to Brighton Marathon organiser Tom Naylor, people are running more than one a year. "Marathon running is on a lot of people's bucket lists, which mean events such as ours continue to grow," he says. "The marathon is a challenge anyone can take on. You don't need skill or to be of a certain physique and age doesn't play a factor. But it's a challenge, no matter who you are. The marathon is unique in that way, which is why I think it's so appealing. Nearly a third (32 per cent) of our participants have never run a marathon before, so clearly the event inspires people every year to get fitter for the event," says Naylor.

New for this year at the Brighton Marathon was a 10k race, which took place before the main marathon start. More than 2,000 people participated in the secondary race, which took in the first stage of the

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MASS PARTICIPATION



Cycling is experiencing a boom in the UK - thanks to the recent successes of British cyclists at the Olympics and Tour de France

One of the common themes of mass participation sport is that it allows an alternative experience of a location, or access to an area which is usually forbidden

► **Marathon route.** The reason for introducing the event was to attract back those who've previously run the marathon, but wouldn't want to do the full distance again - and also to inspire future runners.

GOING HARDCORE

While there has been a rise in these huge mainstream events, there has also been an increase in hardcore mass participation events, where the focus is on personal challenge rather than placing. Steve Wood believes that extreme mass participation sporting events fulfil an innate need for a bit of danger and being outdoors. "We wrongly feel that we have controlled all of the risks in life and this is all part of human desire to push boundaries. When we spend most of our lives indoors, it's also good to have to brave the elements occasionally," he says.

Jo Lake, co-founder of Mudcrew, which organises the Scrooge Run and the R.A.T. run - a 20 mile run along the Cornish cliffs - says people enjoy the mental challenge as much as the physical challenge.

"Training your mind as well as your body is important, so you need to practice. I think people find it addictive," she says.

Paul McGreal, founder of Dirty Events, which organises extreme triathlon, The Celtman, says: "It appeals to an unegotistical group of people seeking out interesting and tough things to do. They don't mind failure in their lives and are motivated by challenge and fear. They start the race not knowing if they'll finish it, but they don't mind that."

VALUE TO THE COMMUNITY

There's another benefit of mass participation sports, which is the economic value to the region. Research published in 2012 by the Sport Industry Research Centre, found that non-elite events can generate substantial economic benefits comparable to - and in some cases greater than - those associated with elite events. An independent assessment of the Brighton Marathon showed that the event was worth £6m to the town in 2013.

The Celtman, which takes place in Wester Ross, Scotland, brings competitors from all over the world. All accommodation in the surrounding areas gets booked up, and the local community council sorts out homestay, matching athletes with people with spare rooms.

Charities also benefit greatly, with many people using mass participation sports challenges to raise funds for causes. Nearly 80 per cent of the 10,000 participants of the Brighton Marathon will raise money, much of which benefits the region. Kent, Sussex and Surrey Air Ambulance has received £89,000 since the event started in 2010. Andy Reed, chair of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, says the rise in mass participation sport is encouraging, especially as many of those taking part are not "die-hard sports nuts and are just the type of people sport needs to reach."

He says that increasing participation is one of the main challenges for the organisation's members and opportunities which involve being outdoors, in a social setting, are popular. He encourages all sports development professionals to offer events such as these, on a smaller scale, and to find interesting locations for them by building links with private landowners. "For organisers and volunteers who have thought about setting up their own version of participation events on a smaller scale, but are put off by bureaucracy and red tape, we would say 'don't be'," he says. "There is the perception among some that



landowners are fickle when accidents take place on their land, but this isn't the case at all. There are lots of guidelines like the Cabinet Office's new can-do guide to help with this aspect. As sports development professionals, our job is also to ensure that more private landowners allow these events to take place on their land."

One of the common themes of mass participation sport is that it allows an

The Celtman competition offers participants a spectacular backdrop in which to put their athleticism to the test

alternative experience of a location, or access into an area which is usually forbidden to the general public. RideLondon allows cyclists the freedom of the capital without cars, the Great

Swim means people can view the beauty of the Lake District from the middle of Windermere, the allure of the Celtman is the spectacular Scottish mountains and runners can at least admire the sea when their legs are giving up.

Our innate need to interact with nature is a big driver of mass participation sport and it could well be the key to mobilising even more people to get active. ●

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